



Saiga News

winter 2007/08: issue 6

Providing a six-language forum for exchange of ideas and information about saiga conservation and ecology

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UK-Kalmykia Cultural Exchange is an inspiration to all involved

In May-June 2007, six saiga enthusiasts participated in a unique experience, supported by the UK Government's Darwin Initiative. Three people from the UK, chosen in a nationwide competition, flew to Kalmykia for a ten-day trip in May, and their counterparts, all Kalmykian saiga experts, made the return trip in June. The aim of the exchange was to foster international friendship and understanding, exchange ideas and insights about how conservation is done in each place, and to raise awareness of the saiga's plight and conservation actions being taken to conserve it.

From the UK came Rosa Baik, a wildlife film-maker from Wales. She filmed a documentary about the trip, including video diaries by all the participants, which is currently being edited. She had another tie to the Kalmykian people, coming from Wales, a proudly independent country within the UK with its own language, very much like Kalmykia. She partnered Olga Obgenova, Director of the NGO Centre for Ecological Projects. Helen Galland is farmyard manager of Spitalfields City Farm, based in a poor inner-city area of London, and providing volunteering opportunities, education and a chance for local people to interact with animals. Her partner was Yuri Arylov, Director of the Centre for Wild Animals, whose saiga breeding centre shares many of the same aims. Finally, artist Alison Milner-Gulland was twinned with Yuri Kaminov, who has responsibility for saiga conservation in the Kalmykian Government, and was interested in finding out more about how conservation action is organised at the local and national levels in the UK.

The UK participants were able to talk to pupils at schools in Yashkul and Komsomolsk, as well as the Arshan Children's Home. They were very impressed with the children's understanding of environmental issues, and their incredible achievements both academically and artistically. It was very clear that the children were proud of their heritage and determined to ensure that the Kalmykian steppes and traditions were kept alive for the future. The group were also honoured to visit the Chernye Zemli Biosphere Reserve, where they witnessed a birthing herd – the sound of saigas mooing to their calves among the feathergrass in the setting sun was quite unforgettable. They were also treated to a tour of the Steppnoi Reserve in Russia, where Anatoly Khludnev and his team treated them to a feast on the steppe and a tour of the highlights of this magical place, including eagles, saigas and a burning artesian well.

Continuation at p.2.

E.J. Milner-Gulland, Imperial College London, e.j.milner-gulland@imperial.ac.uk



The exchange participants enjoy dinner in Yuri Arylov's house (above); Alison Milner-Gulland held an exhibition of her artwork from the visit to raise funds for saiga conservation (below). Photos by E.J. Milner-Gulland

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with additional support from:

All contributions are welcome, in any of our six languages. Please send them to esipov@sarkor.uz, saigaconservationalliance@yahoo.co.uk or to one of the editors. We publish twice a year.

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Continuation (the beginning on p.1)

One of his aims is to build capacity for ecotourism at the Reserve, which would be a major boost to saiga conservation. Another highlight was a night in the visitor centre of the Saiga Breeding Centre, where early risers were able to spend time quietly watching a male saiga at close quarters.

On the return trip, Olga visited an EU-funded initiative based in Wales which supports minority European languages and cultures. Yuri Arylov gave talks to volunteers at the City Farm as well as visiting an Essex Wildlife Trust reserve, and Yuri Kaminov met farmers and volunteers working to conserve the Sussex countryside. The participants noted that in the UK, conservation is taught from a much younger age, and one outcome of the trip was a successful application from Olga to the Saiga Conservation Alliance's small grants initiative, for the development of a schoolbook about saigas aimed at young children. Another point of interest was the preponderance of volunteers in the UK conservation scene, and the local level of the conservation action – something that we aim to foster in Kalmykia as well.

The trip has left powerful and happy memories for all participants, of the strength of friendship and understanding built up through these joint experiences, the warmth of hospitality in both countries, as well as an ongoing commitment to work together to preserve both the saiga and the Kalmykian culture with which it is so intertwined.

Updates

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL



First meeting of the Steering Committee of the Saiga Conservation Alliance

The 12th and 13th September 2007 marked an historic occasion for the Saiga Conservation Alliance – the first meeting of the Steering Committee, with representatives from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Turkmenistan and the UK. The meeting was hosted in Tashkent by the Institute of Zoology of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, and was organised with efficiency and good humor by Elena Bykova and Alexander Esipov. The meeting discussed and ratified the Alliance's Strategic Plan for 2008-2010, judged the small grants competition, and passed a number of resolutions, including one urging the Russian Federation to sign the CMS Memorandum of Understanding on Saiga Conservation. The full list of resolutions is available on the SCA's webpage, www.saiga-conservation.com. A key issue for our strategic planning is the development of regional filials, and it was decided that this would be piloted in Kalmykia and Uzbekistan, with the responsible Steering Committee members reporting back at the next meeting.



Members of the SCA Steering Committee at the Tashkent meeting (above) and visiting the Jeiran Ecocentre (below). Photos by Alexander Esipov

On the second day of the meeting, we discussed our approach to saiga conservation with stakeholders from the government, NGOs and scientific institutions of Uzbekistan. The Steering Committee were impressed with the commitment shown by all these representatives towards saiga conservation in their country, as well as with the high level of knowledge shown in discussions of strategies for saiga conservation in the future. Uzbekistan faces many conservation challenges, but the meeting was an excellent first step towards meeting these challenges.

After the meeting, the Committee had a field trip to the Ecocentre at Bukhara, a renowned centre for the captive breeding of goitered gazelles (*Gazella subgutturosa*) and other endangered species. The Steering Committee are planning to meet again in Moscow in 2009, coinciding with the next congress of the International Union of Game Biologists, although if funds permit they will have an interim meeting in 2008.

E.J. Milner-Gulland. For more information contact us at saigaconservationalliance@yahoo.co.uk

Young scientists present results of saiga research in Italy

On 21-26 September 2007, the 5th European Congress of Mammalogists was held in Siena, Italy. The goal of the congress was to bring together specialists in mammal biology from all over the world so that they could share their latest research results and establish scientific links. More than 500 specialists took part in the congress. N. Arylova and A. Voznesenskaya presented their work "Saiga antelope in the NW Caspian Region: Studies, Protection and Perspectives for Rehabilitation" at the poster session. This poster was a collective work summarizing long-term studies of saiga antelopes in Russia.

Anna Lushchekina. For additional information please follow the link: <http://www.euromammalcongress.org/>.

The saiga has gone to the ocean - participation of the SCA in the WCN Expo-07

As we did last year, (see SN #4), the Saiga Conservation Alliance participated in the annual WCN Expo week held on October, 3-9 in San Francisco, California, USA. The Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), which organises this week, is a US-based NGO. The aim of the Expo is to raise awareness and fundraise for selected conservation issues. The Saiga Conservation Alliance was fortunate not only to attend and raise awareness about the plight of the saiga antelope, but also to be granted full WCN partner status. WCN focuses its effort on supporting newly founded small-scale charities, such as the SCA, during the critical start-up phase. An intense week of training workshops was set up for all attendees, which included newly founded NGOs as well as more established ones such as Cheetah Conservation Fund, Save the Elephants, Snow Leopard Conservancy and others. This week involved fruitful discussions and learning by all parties

The Expo included a public day with plenary speeches by the likes of Jane Goodall and presentations by all the attending organisations, including the SCA, represented by Elena Bykova and Aline Kuhl.

Visitors to the exhibition got acquainted with the featured animals, their lifestyles, the reasons for their decline, and also with the people and culture of those countries where they live.



Jane Goodall among students at the WCN Expo (at the left); The SCA's stall at the Expo (at the right).
Photos by Martin Varon

Handicrafts from saiga range states, including Bukhara ceramics, Samarkand silk and Karakalpak embroidery were sold during the Expo day with great success, as well as pictures and embroideries produced by school children in Kalmykia and Uzbekistan as part of SCA's program to raise awareness. The money obtained from these sales will be spent for saiga conservation.

All in all, the Expo was a great success for the SCA both in terms of fundraising and in making people in California aware of the dramatic decline of one of the most fascinating migratory species worldwide! Leaving the Expo, many people carried away a saiga fluffy toy with them. So, a distant Eurasian antelope has found new friends across the Ocean, who are ready to contribute to its preservation. *Elena Bykova and Aline Kuhl. For more information, or if you would like to purchase a fluffy toy, contact us at saigaconservationalliance@yahoo.co.uk.*

Fauna and Flora International for saiga conservation – FFI Eurasian programme regional meeting

The FFI Eurasia Programme's 2nd Regional Meeting "Culture and Conservation" was held in the Snowdonia National Park, Wales, from 28 October to 2 November. FFI partner organizations from Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Portugal, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan participated in the meeting. Partner organizations shared their experience and plans for future activities in a workshop. They discussed how to improve the sustainability of interactions between humans and nature and the impacts of man and man-made landscapes on biodiversity. The participants familiarized themselves with the sustainable land management techniques employed by Snowdonia National Park.

This is the first time in which the SCA has participated in a meeting of this kind. We presented our work on saiga conservation in Uzbekistan and then discussed our strategy and prospects for further cooperation. It is pleasant to note that FFI supports the mission of the Alliance and is an institutional member of the SCA. With the support of this authoritative international organization, a project is being carried out in Uzbekistan on the involvement of local residents in monitoring of the Ustyurt saiga population (for details see SN #5). This is not the first FFI project on saiga conservation. In 2004, a project was carried out on the socio-economic factors behind the decline in saiga populations in Uzbekistan (for details see SN #1). In 2004-2006, a project on alternative income generation was carried out in the Ustyurt region of Kazakhstan. *Elena Bykova. Further information from <http://www.fauna-flora.org/eurasia.php>*



Participants visiting a Nuclear Power Station in Snowdonia National Park. Photo by Elena Bykova

Saigas discussed at a Large Herbivore Foundation meeting

An annual meeting of the Large Herbivore Foundation was held in Lviv, the Ukraine, on 3-8 October 2007. Specialists from Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Canada, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, the USA, Turkey, Switzerland, the Ukraine and Uzbekistan attended this meeting. A report of the LHF's activities was presented as well as reports on projects on particular species; Bukhara deer, saiga, goitered gazelle, kulan and Przewalsky's horse. Significant attention was devoted to the discussion of saiga projects, including the project of WWF and Frankfurt Zoological Society in Betpak-Dala, Kazakhstan and the FFI (Fauna and Flora International) project working with local residents in the Uzbek part of the Ustyurt Plateau. A report was presented on the state of saiga populations in Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan by members of the Saiga Conservation Alliance. In her speech, A. Lushchekina called on everybody to join the Alliance and undertake joint efforts aimed at the conservation of this species and implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding and Action Plan. H. Yungius spoke about the launching of the WWF project on saiga conservation and work with local residents in Mongolia.

Anna Lushchekina. Information on this foundation is available at <http://www.largeherbivore.org/>.

Control of saiga horn smuggling is a focus of discussion at a meeting in Novosibirsk

Representatives of environmental organizations, customs offices, CITES administrative and scientific authorities from Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia gathered for a trilateral working meeting "The development of international cooperation for the realization of the CITES convention in Altai-Sayan Ecoregion", which was held on 2-7 December in Novosibirsk.

The meeting was organised by the international NGO Siberian Ecological Center (Novosibirsk), the Association for Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (Almaty) and WWF Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar), all of which work on the problem of illegal trade in flora and fauna. The meeting was organized as part of the UNDP/GEF project "The conservation of biodiversity in the Russian part of the Altai-Sayan Ecoregion", with the support of a similar project carried out in Kazakhstan. The Siberian Customs Department also made a significant contribution to the organization of the meeting.

The main goal of the meeting was the establishment of working contacts among customs offices of neighboring states, as well as among agencies and institutions involved in the implementation of CITES requirements.



Discussion of approaches to transboundary cooperation. Photo by Ilya Smelansky

Particular attention was paid to the development of operational interactions within previously ratified intergovernmental and interdepartmental agreements and protocols. The control of smuggling of certain particularly problematic animal species, including the saiga, was discussed in detail. Only the Mongolian subspecies of the saiga inhabits the Altai-Sayan region, in Mongolia. Its numbers are extremely low and poaching for horns could completely extirpate the subspecies. However, the major focus of smuggling is the horns of the European subspecies, which is not found in this ecoregion. Nevertheless, the problem was addressed at the meeting because the saiga is one of the species that is most extensively traded internationally in this region. Cases of saiga horn smuggling in the region have been reported; it is likely that horns are being transported across the Russian-Kazakh border.

The meeting participants listened with interest to reports on the status of saiga populations in Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia. They then discussed how best customs offices of the three states could contribute to saiga conservation. It was evident – and this concerns not just the saiga – that first and foremost local environmental and law-enforcement bodies must be especially attentive to poaching of particular species, and intervene at all stages (in particular during the transportation of products from these species). It was also emphasized that in order to investigate violations effectively, there is a need for the training of specialists with the necessary skills. *For further information, please contact Il'ya Smelyansky and Elvira Nikolenko, Siberian Ecological Center at ilya@ecoclub.nsu.ru.*

Conservation of the wildlife of Ustyurt

In mid-July, the Institute of Zoology of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences sent letters to the senior vice-president of LukOil Overseas, Mr. Azat Shamsuarov, the president of LukOil, Mr. Vagit Alekperov and to the office of this company in Uzbekistan. A similar letter was sent to the chairman of Gazprom, Mr. Alexey Miller. The letters expressed concern about the state of the vulnerable biological and landscape diversity of the Ustyurt region as a result of the development of gas deposits which has been initiated and the geological exploration and seismic surveys on the Ustyurt Plateau. The saiga is one of the key representatives of the Ustyurt fauna, having a crucial role in the ecology of plains ecosystems and rangelands. The letters expressed anxiety that the growing activity of the oil and gas companies in this region would bring about the destruction and fragmentation of habitats, an increase in poaching and disturbance, as well as in the noise and chemical contamination, and degradation of vegetation and soil cover.

The authors of the letter call upon the managers of the oil and gas companies to take the necessary measures to reduce possible losses to the nature of this unique region resulting from their activities and to do their best to conserve the biological and landscape diversity of the region.

To preserve the biodiversity of Ustyurt and reduce possible risks, the following steps are suggested: to provide public access to the environmental impact assessments carried out at all stages of project planning (justification of investments, feasibility study); to apply the most environmentally-friendly technologies in exploration work; to carry out an independent environmental audit of the current status of ecosystems on the Ustyurt Plateau in the areas of intended activities of these companies; to prepare and implement an action plan for the conservation of biodiversity in Ustyurt within the framework of their activities; to participate in financing measures aimed at the conservation of the biodiversity of Ustyurt; to render assistance in conducting ecological education programmes for local residents and for staff of the gas-extracting industry in Ustyurt; and to support the implementation of social programs in settlements of the Ustyurt Plateau with the aim of preventing people from poaching.

For further information please contact Alexander Esipov and Elena Bykova at esipov@sarkor.uz and Rustam Murzakhanov at naraspashku@gmail.com.

Meeting on saiga conservation in Uzbekistan

A meeting entitled "Methods for effective conservation of the Ustyurt saiga population in Uzbekistan" was held in Nukus, Uzbekistan, on 23 November 2007. Representatives of the State Committee for Nature Protection of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan, Saiga Conservation Alliance, the Institute of Zoology of Uzbek Academy of Sciences, the Karakalpak State University, the Institute of Bioecology of the Karakalpak Branch of Uzbek Academy of Sciences, the GEF/UNDP Tugai Project, the Customs Committee of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Home Ministry of the Republic of Karakalpakstan and mass media attended the meeting. WCN and FFI provided the financial support for this meeting. The meeting discussed measures aimed at the conservation of the saiga in Uzbekistan in compliance with the medium-term work program on the saiga agreed at the first meeting of signatories to the MOU on saiga conservation (SN #5). The meeting participants emphasized that only integrated measures and close interactions of all stakeholders and agencies could yield positive results.

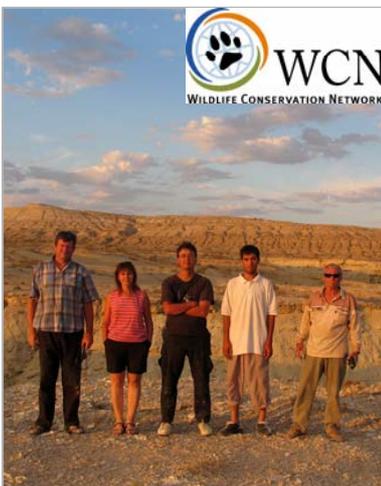


An animated discussion (from left to right: S.Atamuratov, P.Reimov, A.Grigoriants). Photo by Alexander Esipov

The participants had a number of specific ideas on the strengthening of the effectiveness of conservation of the Ustyurt saiga population in Uzbekistan, which included: Developing a joint action plan on the conservation of the Ustyurt saiga population and its habitats; signing an intergovernmental agreement on saiga conservation saiga between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; including the saiga in the Red Data Book of the Republic of Uzbekistan; considering the reorganization of the present Saigachiy reserve into a stricter form of protected area; carrying out annual aerial surveys of the Ustyurt population; adapting existing methods of captive breeding for Uzbekistan; strengthening interactions with companies developing the Ustyurt region (primarily oil and gas extracting companies).

At the end of the meeting a desire was expressed for the State Committee for Nature Protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan to join the Saiga Conservation Alliance.

The resolution of the meeting is posted at the SCA web-site: www.saiga-conservation.com. For further information please contact Elena Bykova and Alexander Esipov at esipov@sarkor.uz.



Participants in the expedition to the Asake-Audan depression. Photo by Alexander Esipov

An expedition to Southern Ustyurt

A saiga conservation expedition to Southern Ustyurt took place in late July, organized by the Institute of Zoology and the Saiga Conservation Alliance with the support of WCN. Its goal was to collect data on the distribution and demography of the saiga.

In Uzbekistan, the saiga inhabits the Ustyurt Plateau – a sparsely populated desert region in the north-west of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Ustyurt population is trans-boundary: Saigas migrate and the Ustyurt saigas, as a rule, move seasonally between threecountries; Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The scientists on the expedition studied the species' seasonal distribution in Uzbekistan and confirmed that there are separate groupings within the population. The team worked closely with local residents, who help to carry out saiga monitoring year-round, implemented an educational programme with schoolchildren and provided information on the saiga to local people.

For further information please contact Alexander Esipov and Elena Bykova at esipov@sarkor.uz.

The “Saga of the Saiga” is to continue



All living things have the right to live. Although laws are sometimes too strict, they cannot be compared in cruelty to human behaviour. This is the theme of a typical story of present-day life in the steppe. In September 2007, participants in two festivals watched the “Saga of the Saiga”. The 15-minute animated cartoon by a Shymkent studio, AniMASTER, was included in the Byelorussian “Animaevka” and the Kazakhstan Cinema Forum “The Beginnings of Shaken”. In October 2007, AniMASTER studio announced the opening of a competition “the Collective Scenario”. Its goal is to complete the story that began in the first film. All creative people who care about the issues are invited to participate in this contest. The sponsors of this project are the Committee for Forestry and Hunting of the Ministry of Agriculture of Kazakhstan, the private charitable foundation “Seimar Social Fund”, the Union for Protection of Nature in Germany – NABU – and the company AGIP KCO.

The deadline for proposals is 25 January 2008. The winners of the competition will have their ideas and scenarios acknowledged in the credits of the film “Saga of the Saiga-2”. Details of the project are available on the web-site www.saiga.kz. For further information please contact the director of the AniMASTER studio, M. Zharimbetov at zmaxut@mail.ru.

A large consignment of saiga horns is seized in Taiwan

The TRAFFIC International report from July 2007 (TRAFFIC Bulletin, vol.21, #2 (2007) 81, <http://www.traffic.org/content/991.pdf>) states that 'Customs officials at Keelung port, Taiwan seized 680 Saiga Antelope Saiga tatarica (CITES II) horns. The specimens had been concealed in a container of traditional Chinese medicines on a vessel arriving by sea from China via Hong Kong. One of the horns was embedded with a bullet.'

Poachers caught red-handed

Mobile teams from the west Kazakhstan regional Department of Forestry and Game Hunting have literally been “shepherding” the Volga-Ural saiga population for several years, with the assistance of local residents. This year, the first sign of poaching was observed in August: a resident of south Zhalgalsky district, riding a motor bike, killed a saiga. His fellow-villagers immediately informed law-enforcement officers. Another sign came from Kaztalovsky district. Poachers were detained at a road checkpoint with six pairs of horns, 18 kg of saiga meat and arms. An investigation is underway. The poachers will be fined one and a half million tenge, and the court confiscated their transport. Based on information in Express-K, No203 (16351) of 03.11.2007.

Saiga horns confiscated on the Uzbek-Kazakh border



A customs officer with a consignment of confiscated saiga horns. Photo by Alexander Esipov

In July 2007, Uzbek customs officers detained a citizen of Uzbekistan attempting to smuggle 15 pairs of saiga horns to Kazakhstan. Most horns belonged to adult males. The state of the horns suggested that they had been in the open for a long time. Currently, old horns are regularly collected, due to the decline in the saiga population and hence the lack of fresh horns. According to the current legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, being in a hunting areas with dead animals or their bodyparts is equivalent to hunting. The horns were confiscated and an investigation is under way. For further information please contact Gennady Goncharov at envconf@uzsci.net

Saigas in the News

Россия: *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, 24 November 2007 [abridged]

Saigas disappear at the turn of the century.

Feather-grasses instead of weedy grasses

In our country, saiga antelopes inhabit the north-western pre-Caspian region, mainly Kalmykia. A significant decline in the numbers began in 1997, from about 270,000 individuals. However, in spring 2001 their numbers were estimated as low as 17,700 individuals. What was the cause of such a dramatic decline? In the opinion of hunting experts, a range of factors, both natural and social, accounted for this decline. The head of the Department for Protection, Control and Regulation of the Use of Hunted Animals of Rosselkhoznadzor (Russian Agricultural Inspection), the Republic of Kalmykia, Olga Bukreeva, notes that cold winters in 1998-1999 triggered the decline, when saiga antelopes had to migrate to neighbouring Dagestan. However, their fate was no better there. Most animals died as a result of exhaustion during this hard migration. Besides, they fell prey to poaching. We initially stated that their numbers had dropped as a result of poaching. However, it is obvious now that this was not the main reason; obviously there was a biological reason. Every species has its own periods of declines and increases in numbers. The saiga's carrying capacity is on the decline. In the late 19th and early 20th century, a similarly significant decline was recorded. The reasons were the same as now – the deterioration of habitat, hard winters and lack of forage. The viability of an animal depends on its food resources, its physical state and fecundity. Judging by the available food resources, the saiga antelope has very little chance to increase in numbers. The composition of weedy grasses does not provide the whole range of nutrients for the health of the population. Studies carried out by the workers of Rosselkhoznadzor have shown that saigas' calving period has shifted later since the 1990s. In this way, the animals respond to changes in weather conditions. The latest calving was recorded in 1998, when it lasted from 15th to 28th May. For comparison, in the 1970s, calving took place in late April-early May. Of course, the abnormal climatic conditions we witness now could not but affect the condition of these animals. The cold spring and warm setting in of winter – all these sharp changes in temperature increase the death rate of calves due to chilling. In recent years, the death rate in newly born saiga calves has increased from 5 to 23 percent. On average, it has been 13.9% in the last six years.



Saigas at a watering hole. Steпноi Reserve. Photo by Anna Lushchekina

The two-legged wolf is wide awake

Yury Kaminov, the Deputy Director for Natural Resources and Protection of Nature, says, "The situation with the saiga, as doctors say, is stable but severe. Its numbers neither grow nor decline. Compared with previous years, the situation has stabilized, of course." Yuri Arylov, the Director of the Center for Wild Animals situated in Yashkul district, is rightly at a loss as to why the population does not increase as young saigas are born every year and there are no epidemics, natural calamities or migrations. In the summer, fire in the steppe caused the death of 30 saiga antelopes. However, taking into account the total population size, this loss is not significant. Perhaps wolves are to blame for the decline? Why then we do not see many remains of these antelopes in the steppe? Most likely, the reason is the two-legged wolf – the poacher.

Yuri Kaminov was informed recently that meals of saiga meat have been served in a Yashkul café. Not so long ago, this meat was openly traded in one of Elista's markets at 75 rubles per kg. This information reaches hunting inspectors "bush radio" with a delay of several days. This is why it is impossible to detain the poachers. Olga Bukreeva states that there has not been a single case of these people being caught red-handed. If saigas are killed for their horns, which are used in some medicines, nowadays it is impossible to earn much money from them. The Chinese market – the major consumer of horns – abounds with saiga horns. So it appears that the saiga is killed only for sport?

What can be done?

Until now the question of transferring authority for the saiga protection to the regional level has remained open. It is expected that on 1 January 2007 these duties will be entrusted to the Committee for Natural Resources. Kaminov notes that the situation will then become worse, because funding will be significantly reduced. However, Olga Bukreeva believes that this will not happen because the saiga a species of federal importance, which is included on lists of rare and valuable species in decline. It is under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation and nothing will change in this respect.

Currently, the population approximates 18,000-20,000 individuals. The protection of these animals is at an appropriate level; however, we do not observe an increase in their numbers. In the opinion of experts, there are only two factors which humans can influence in order to improve the protection of the saiga. It is important to increase the effectiveness of poaching control and to take a range of measures aimed at reducing wolf numbers – the major enemies of the saiga. Higher densities of wolves are observed in all saiga habitats. Yuri Arylov believes that first and foremost it is important to carry out counts of saiga numbers. The last aerial survey took place in 2004. Yuri Kaminov strongly objects to aerial surveys. The main reason is that these counts are carried out in May when the calving begins.

Arylov agrees with Kaminov, "The count must be shifted to a different period, autumn, so as not to disturb these animals." It is better to use an infrared imager. This technology, based on the difference in temperatures between animals and the environment, has been perfected on other animals. The possibility of error is minimized, and a computer is used for counting the animals. No doubt, this entails significant expense. However, it is possible to attract various sources of funding. As they say, the end justifies the means."

Lyudmila Sarangova

From the Editors: If you would like to have your say on questions raised in this article, or on any other items in this issue, please send us your comments and opinions, and we will publish a selection of these in the next issue of *Saiga News*.

Articles

The Pleistocene range area of the Eurasian saiga (*Saiga tatarica* L.) in Kazakhstan

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Between 1760 and 1953, 10 species of saiga were defined. However, only one species is now recognised, *Saiga tatarica* L. with two subspecies. The evolution of this antelope was directed towards adaptation to life in dry steppe and semi-desert conditions, feeding on tough grasses and rapid running (up to 70-80 km/h). Saigas were considered from ancient times as one of the most available game animals and therefore played an important role in the life of Paleolithic man. This is testified to by the rock figures of saiga outlines of the Bronze Age in the Tamgaly gorge and Semirechie, Kazakhstan. The most ancient finds of fossil saigas in Kazakhstan are from the mid-Pleistocene and are in Priirtyshie (Podpusk and Iamyshevo).

The period in which saigas appeared in Kazakhstan is the Mustie epoch (about 120-110 thousand years ago); the remains of horn-cores and skeleton parts were found, together with archaeological artifacts, in 1968 in a Mustie encampment (Ushbas, North-eastern slope of the Bolshoi Karatau ridge).

From 1960, 34 locations with fossil saiga remains have been found in Kazakhstan. Saiga remains are known from late Paleolithic encampments between the Ural river and Priirtyshie. In Neolithic settlements of the Bronze Age their remains are found in Kostanai, Kokshetau, Karaganda, Dzhezkazgan and Shymkent regions (Kozhamkulova 1969, 1981). The abundance of saiga remains in Paleolithic encampments suggests favourable habitat conditions in Pleistocene landscapes of Kazakhstan. Along with saigas, other species found are mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, giant deer, elk, short-legged bison, Knobloch camel and kulan. All these species, except the saiga, elk and camel, disappeared in the late Pleistocene.

The area inhabited by these species occupied almost the whole northern half of Eurasia, including Kazakhstan. From the beginning of the Holocene, saiga is found with modern species of animals.

Data suggest that the range of fossil saigas in Kazakhstan, especially in the late Pleistocene, was much further north than the modern saiga range. At the beginning of the Holocene, the fossil range area coincides with that of modern saigas. In the glacial period, the saiga could adapt to cold conditions without significant morphological changes. In the post-glacial period, the saiga also acclimatized without visible changes to steppe, desert and semi-desert conditions. The continued existence of this highly specialized animal is due to the continuity of the paleogeographic conditions connected first of all with flat relief, dryness of the ground and minimal snow cover. The dates of saiga finds coincide well with materials on the geology of Kazakhstan in the Pleistocene and with archaeological artifacts. Fossil saigas may serve as a true indicator of paleogeographic conditions, characteristic of the Eurasian Pleistocene.

In the late Palaeolithic epoch, the saiga, as part of the mammoth fauna, inhabited the whole of Europe to England in the north-west and the Pechora river in the north-east. In Asia, saigas occupied valleys of Siberian rivers such as the Irtysh, Enisey and Lena, penetrating to Novosibirsk island in the east. Its bone remains are even found in Alaska. It was known from the time of I.D. Chersky that saigas had a wide distribution in the Pleistocene, stretching to the furthest northern limits of the Asiatic continent. Saigas were numerous in the Crimea, and are supposed to have overwintered there. In Europe, *Saiga borealis* was a common element of the mid-Pleistocene fauna of the Khasar period on the Russian plain and penetrated to Germany (Baryshnikov et al. 1998).

It is an astonishing fact that the Eurasian saiga lived in Kazakhstan more than 100 thousand years ago, and may continue to exist there for a very long time in the absence of anthropogenic pressure or natural disasters.



Petroglyphs of saiga, Kazakhstan. Photo by A.Kuhl

The current status of the saiga in southern Balkhash region

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The presence of saigas in the southern Balkhash region is connected with periods of high numbers in the 1970s and seasonal migrations. In the winter of 1976-1977 many animals were observed in groups of 2-3 and 10-30 individuals in the delta of the River Ili and in the Saryesyk Atyrau desert (V.M. Pokachalov, pers.comm.). It is evident that in winter herds of saiga penetrated to the Ili Delta and desert areas lying in the interfluvium of the Ili and Karatal rivers, crossing canals and even ice-covered Lake Balkhash from the Betpakdala and northern Balkhash region. Some of the animals remained during spring and summer, unable to migrate back because of exhaustion or rapid break-up of ice on the canals and lakes. In the 1980-1990s, we recorded saigas on large desert islands of the vast Ili delta and some parts of the Saryesyk Atyrau desert. In the spring and summer of 1986 to 1996, we periodically observed these antelopes on one of the largest islands between the Ili and Bazarbai canals (for example a group of ca. 20, mixed age and sex, in May 1986). Shepherds, musquash hunters and fishermen poached these individuals. In spring-summer 1989, 14 saigas remained on this island, hunted by local horsemen. By early September 1989, only 8 individuals remained. During an aerial survey on 31 March 1995, six saigas (2 males) were recorded on this island. Our last encounters of single individuals on this island were in spring-summer 1996. From the late 1990s until 2007 no saigas were recorded on the islands of the Ili delta; nor did surveys of local people confirm their presence. In 1986-1996 groups of 5-20 saigas were also recorded in other desert areas of the lower reaches of the River Ili – along the right-bank of the Zhideli and Shubar-Kunan canals to the beds of the Naryn and Arystan rivers.

Local people on horses hunted saigas with traps and loops in the Asaubai and Nauryzbai plains, where saigas migrated. A local horse-herd caught a newly born saiga on 24 May 1986, which was then kept in an enclosure with domestic animals (mainly sheep) and fed on cow's milk for several days.

Another group of saigas still remains in the desert of the Ili-Karatal interfluvium: approximately 20 individuals inhabited the Saryesyk Atyrau desert year-round in 2005-2007. Sixteen individuals (2 adult males, 10 females, 4 juveniles) were observed 35 km north-east of Karoi village on 21 March 2005. In late March and April the tracks of approximately 20 saiga antelopes and their fresh faeces were periodically recorded in a radius of 5-7 km from the place of their first encounter.



A new-born saiga. Photo by Yury Grachev

The water from melted snow had accumulated in loamy depressions called khaks; it served as a temporary watering place for various species. In May these khaks dried up and the saigas moved closer to the southern coast of Lake Balkhash, where their traces were recorded not far from Bozaral village. Similar observations were made in the same area at the same time of year in 2006 and 2007.

In the first six months of 2000, several dozen saigas were recorded many times on the Saryesyk peninsula on the southern coast of Lake Balkhash and in sandy deserts between the Ili and Karatal rivers (Sh. Irsaev, pers.com.). Evidence of poaching in this area came from three skulls, one with horns sawn off. We did not record any saigas east of Karatal river despite the landscape being similar.

Local people revealed that a resident of Bakanas village killed two two-year-old males from a small group approximately 15 km from the village on 25 December 2006. The animals may have made seasonal migrations within the limits of the vast Ili-Karatal interfluvium, because the snow cover is thicker, winds stronger and the temperatures lower on the Balkhash coast, compared to the Bakanass plains to the south.

Residents of Karoi village revealed that hunters and poachers are aware of saigas inhabiting areas to the north-east of the village. Poachers from Almaty and elsewhere also come to hunt these saigas, using off-road vehicles. Such "safaris" are organized after snowfalls, when it becomes easy to trace the saigas by their tracks in the daytime, and by using powerful searchlights. These touring poachers cross the south Balkhash deserts using satellite navigation and GPSes.

The southern saiga subpopulation could be a focus for population growth. However, it is important to improve law enforcement activities in the area and raise awareness and responsibility for environmental protection both among local communities and more generally, which is very important given the increasing poaching pressure in recent years. Without specific funding allocation, further monitoring of this sub-population is unlikely.

Population assessment of the Mongolian saiga

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In order to determine the population size, structure, density and migration of the Mongolian saiga and to assess threats to the subspecies, the Institute of Biology carries out an annual population assessment in cooperation with WWF MPO and local rangerst, using consistent methods. Vehicle transects are carried out in the Shargiin Gobi, Khuisiin Gobi, Durgen valley and Mankhan county, providing information on trends in population dynamics and distribution. WWF MPO funds these studies. Our last assessment took place over 22 days, from January 8 to January 22, 2007. The study was carried out by Dr.L.Amgalan and MSc. B.Chimeddorj from the Institute of Biology, MAS and rangers from "Irbis-3" anti-poaching team B.Batsaikhan and Sh.Gantulga (see photo).

In Shargiin Gobi saigas were seen in Bor Nuruu, Khatan Khudgiin Bel, Khatsavchiin Bel, Tsagaan Ders, while in Khuisiin Gobi they were observed in Goviin Khudag, Ulaan Guvein Khooloi, Gulguuriin Ovoo, Khukh Javj, Bultger, and in Mankhan the saiga were distributed in the Ooshiin Khodoo and Ishgen Tolgoi hills. Saigas were encountered in large numbers and high density in Khuisiin Gobi, and comparison with the results of previous years' surveys shows that this place is still an important habitat for saigas (see map, Fig. 1).



Team members (at the left); Shargiin Gobi (at the centre); Searching for saiga (at the right);
Photo by B.Chimeddorj

In total we encountered 184 herds consisting of 1734 individuals. We extrapolate from this to estimate that in the range area of 12,293 km² there are 2860 saiga with a density of 2.3 animals per 1000 ha. This is 1.8x the saiga number estimated in last year's survey. In Ooshiin Khodoo and Ishgen Tolgoi of the Mankhan population we estimated that there were 15 animals with a density of 0.3 individuals per 1000 ha in 494.5 km² range. Figure 2 shows the dynamics of the saiga population from 1998 to 2007.

Of the 184 herds observed, 77.1% (n=142) numbered 1 to 10 individuals, 14.6% (n=27) numbered 11 to 20 individuals, 8.1% (n=15) more than 21 individuals. The sex ratio of the 194 animals identified was 14% adult males, 53% females, and 33% calves. From these numbers the ratio of males to females is 1:4, which is normal, while the female:calf ratio is 1.6:1 (102:64), which means that almost half of females did not give birth or that the death rate among calves is quite high.

There are several natural and human related threats still remaining for saiga populations in Mongolia. Calves are highly susceptible to steppe eagles and other carnivores like the manul cat, corsac and red fox (see photo), while poaching is still extant.

Conclusions and recommendations:

- The population of Mongolian saigas is increasing compared to the previous five years, although the mortality rate among calves is still high.
- Meteorological data for the last five years also shows that climatic conditions were suitable for the saiga. Winters were normal and summers had adequate rainfall, good vegetation cover and no droughts.
- Poaching is still the major threat to saiga populations. In November 2006, local people poached 54 saiga males.
- The current number of saiga rangers (10) is adequate according to the Mongolian Law on Protected Areas, however they need to be trained and acquainted with the relevant laws, supplied with transportation, equipment and good salaries.
- Anti-poaching activities must be urgently increased using all kinds of media and advertisements. The names of informants must be kept anonymously and they must be financially compensated.

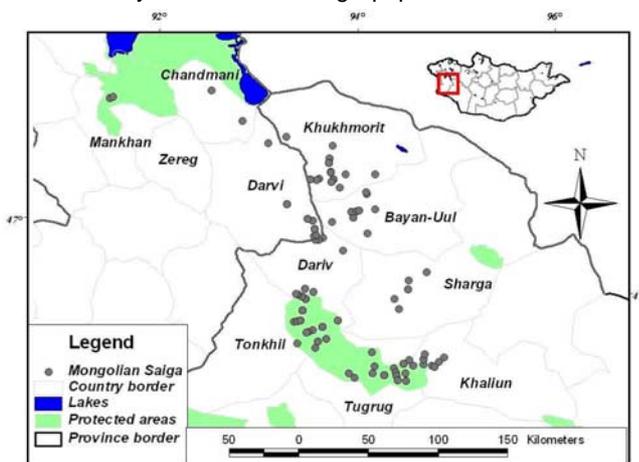


Figure 1. Distribution of the Mongolian saiga (January, 2007)

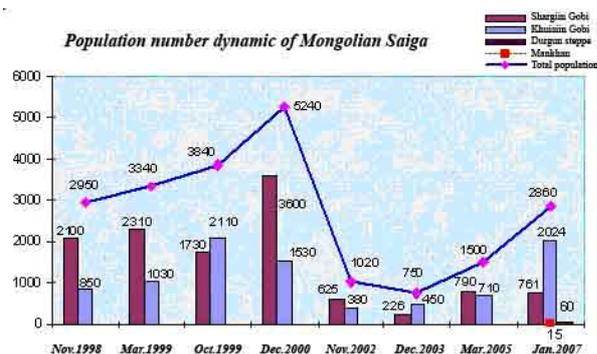


Fig. 2. Population size of the Mongolian saiga

Research on population estimates and movements of the Mongolian saiga, 2006-07

Joel Berger^{1,2}, Kim Murray-Berger², Julie Young², and Buuveibaatar³

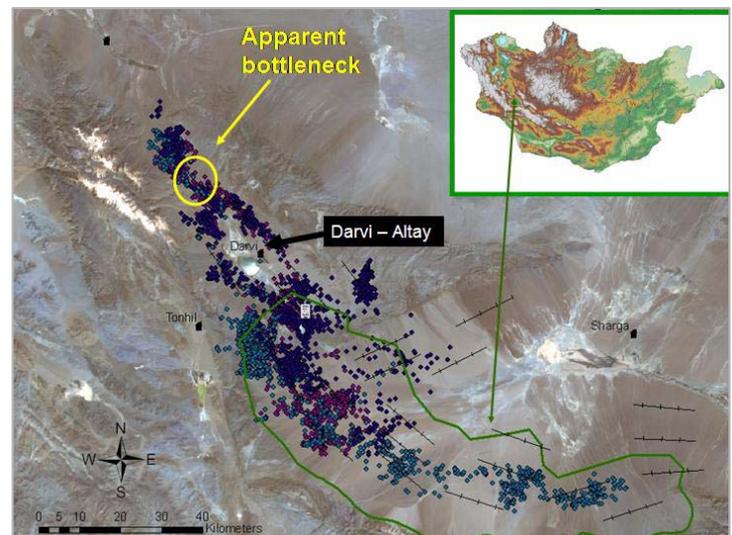
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In 2005, in conjunction with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the Wildlife Conservation Society initiated efforts to begin a field study and explore the population size and movements of the endangered Mongolian saiga (*Saiga tatarica mongolica*). As we reported Saiga News (SN # 4, 2006/07), we placed GPS collars on 8 female saiga and conducted surveys of population size in and around the Shargyn-Gov Nature Reserve. Although results and appropriate methodology will be reported in appropriate peer-reviewed scientific journals, we take this opportunity to report preliminary findings based on results from the 2006 and 2007 field season.

Of the 8 GPS collars we deployed, 2 with satellite capabilities recorded no successful uploads of data, and these animals were deleted from our sample. Of the 6 remaining outfitted animals, we recovered 5 collars. Two animals had died, one presumably by attack from a golden eagle and the other for unknown reasons. The remaining three animals each produced about 1600 data points on movements.

While preliminary, several results of the data from 2006 have important conservation implications (see map). 1) Home ranges sizes were large (3000 – 4000 km²), and in excess of the size of the nature reserve. 2) The maximum elevations used exceeded 2300m, demonstrating some seasonal movement to altitudes higher than we had expected. 3) All (N=4) of the animals using the northern portion of the Shargyn-Gov crossed through a restricted topographical bottleneck no greater than 5 kilometers wide. This latter finding is critical because it may not be possible to assure connectivity between disjunct population segments such as the saiga of Huisyn-Gov and Shargyn-Gov if this narrow corridor is blocked. Given that a road crosses this area and herders and livestock also use it, discussions must be held and a plan implemented to minimize the effects of existing disturbance of saiga when using this region. Among other efforts during the 2007 field season was a repeat assessment of population size in and around the Shargyn-Gov reserve using Distance Sampling. This technique has the advantage of deriving population estimates with both a mean and variance, and it enables an approximation of the probability of detecting animals at varying distances from the survey team.

During 2006, 24 15-km transects separated by a minimum of 5 kms were driven, and surveys using these same transects were repeated in 2007; data were gathered in September in both years. The mean population estimate in 2006 was 3,597 saiga (95% Confidence Interval 2,192-5,904). The density was 0.55 ± 0.14 saiga/km², based on the assumption that about 7,200 km² of habitat is available. Data are currently being analyzed so that 2007 population estimates will be available. The results for 2006 are encouraging because they suggest that the population size in the Shargyn-Gov region has either recovered from critically low values or that population sizes have always been larger than previously suspected. Either way, however, results are encouraging for Mongolian saigas because saigas also occur in areas beyond the Shargyn-Gov region.



Map. Legend: Movements of adult female saiga in and around the Sharygn-Gov (reserve boundaries in green), September 2006 - 07. Straight black lines reflect transect routes for estimating population density. Apparent bottleneck circled in yellow.

Experience of saiga satellite telemetry in the Northwest Precaspian region

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In 2004-2005, specialists from the Centre of Wild Animals of Kalmykia carried out an experimental project on saiga telemetry together with staff from the "Stepnoi" Nature Reserve of the Astrakhan region and the A.N. Severtsov Institute of Problems of Ecology and Evolution. The research was supported by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Chicago Zoological Society. The initial goal of the project was to monitor saiga migrations and track the adaptation of captive bred animals to natural conditions.



Adaptation of saiga male with a satellite collar at Yashkul' Breeding Centre, Kalmykia. Photo by Nils Bunnefeld

However, performance problems of the collars limited the usefulness of the data and precluded the completion of the initial project objectives. The purpose of this article is to analyze the data obtained, identify possible reasons for technical problems and conduct an assessment of transmitter performance. We hope that this experience could be used for future projects dealing with satellite telemetry for saiga population monitoring in the North-West Caspian region and other parts of the saiga's range.

Five male saigas from Yashkul breeding centre were equipped with Telonics ST-20/3210 satellite transmitters. The signal from such transmitters is regularly broadcast to one of the satellites of the ARGOS system [1]. For testing, the operating time of the collars was separated into two periods. During the first period, the transmitters were sending data each third day from 8 to 12 a.m (UTC) using a preset signal power level of 0.5W.

During this period many transmissions were missed, hence in the second period, all transmitters were reprogrammed to a higher signal power of 1.0W and set to transmit each day. Two collars malfunctioned after reprogramming. During the second period, transmitters were taken off the animals and held in a fixed location. To assess the performance of the transmitters we calculated the potential and actual number of transmissions (Fig. 1.) and number of standard and non-standard locations for messages with geographic coordinates.

During the first period 46% of transmissions from the 5 transmitters were missed and 79% of transmissions did not result in a location. From 235 messages received, 74 contained locations, of which only 14 were of standard (usable) quality. For the second period, for the remaining 3 transmitters, 44% transmissions were missed and 52% of transmissions did not result in a location. Of 310 messages received, 227 contained locations of which 104 were of standard quality. The fixed position of the transmitters in the second part of the experiment made it possible to quantify the accuracy of the locations relative to actual location. For the standard location quality classes 3, 2, 1, 0 (in descending order of data quality), the mean error was $0.3(\pm 0.2)$, $0.6(\pm 0.4)$, $1.4(\pm 1.0)$, $4.0(\pm 2.7)$ km respectively. For the the non-standard quality location classes A and B, the mean error was $1.4(\pm 1.6)$ and $11.0(\pm 10.6)$ km.

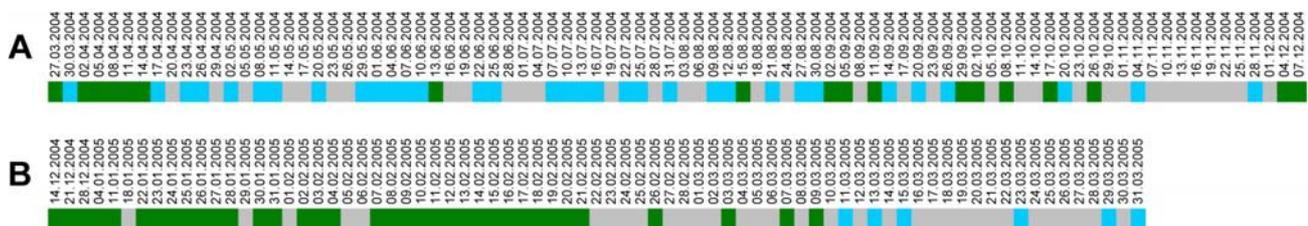


Figure 1. Transmissions of one of the collars before (A) and after (B) the increase in power level. Cells – transmission windows: green – received message with location, blue – received message without location, gray – no message received.

Our results show that the performance of the transmitters and the accuracy of the locations obtained was generally poor. This is especially the case for the first period, when transmitters operated with a lower signal power. This can potentially be explained by the presence of broadband noise on ARGOS frequencies in southern Europe [2]. Increase in signal power led to a higher number of successful transmissions and 6-10x more high-quality locations (Fig. 2). However, this increase also led to faster loss of battery power, resulting in an increase in the number of missed transmissions at the end of the battery's life (Fig. 1).

Results of this project suggest more careful planning and implementation of satellite telemetry projects in this region are required, including more rigorous testing of the transmitters prior to mounting.

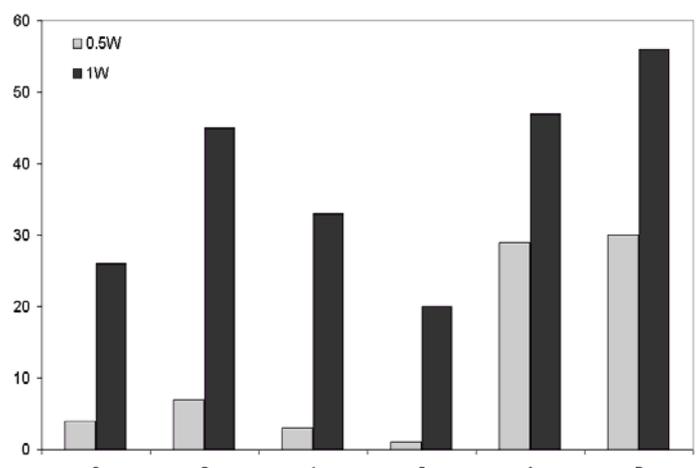


Fig 2. The number of locations of different classes before and after increase of power level. Standard quality classes are 3, 2, 1, 0 in descending order of quality; non-standard classes (low quality) are A and B.

1. CLS (2007). Argos user's manual. <https://www.argos-system.org/manual>

2. Gros, P., Malard, J.-P., & Woodward, B. (2006). Argos performance in Europe. Tracker News, 7

A study of saiga horns

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The saiga is a unique species, one of the most ancient representatives of the mammoth fauna, which flourished in the mid- and late Pleistocene (see article in this issue). The elimination of the threat of extinction for this species is an urgent problem. Therefore, in the mid-1990s, the Kalmykia State University initiated a study on alternatives for saiga horns. The goal of our project was to isolate physiologically active substances from saiga horn extracts and identify their structure. This could help in finding other sources of these or similar compounds, e.g. in closely related species, or in finding alternative ways to obtain the chemicals through targeted organic synthesis.

The studies had two parts. We isolated the basic components of the horn and then synthesized them. The study revealed that saiga horns are similar in composition to those of sheep. Then, we aimed our studies towards finding an alternative to saiga horns. Working together with the Department of Physiology at Moscow State University and the Department of Pharmacology at Volgograd Medical Academy, we documented a positive effect of saiga horns in the control of ulcer formation and even showed a medical effect. The highest medical effect was recorded for horns of saiga antelopes obtained during the mating period. Using the alcohol system of ulcer formation we showed that sheep horns also contributed to the prevention of ulcer formation.

The study of the extracts of these two types of horns showed that their main component was ninhydrin-staining substances. Free amino acids and short peptides, as well as the remnants of nucleic acids, an insignificant number of steroids and biogenic amines were recorded. Preliminary data showed that the amount of amines changed depending on the physiological state of the animals (before, during or after mating).

Our studies revealed similar chromatographic profiles of the extracts of saiga and sheep horns when separated using the method of exclusive chromatography on sephadex G-25. Only the ratio of components changed.

The pattern of distribution of ninhydrin-staining substances was also similar. However, the study of the structure of these substances was problematic.

The diverse chemical composition of the horns allows the suggestion that bioactive substances (BAS) were not in the form of separate components, but were a complex of compounds, both organic and chemical. It was extremely difficult to separate these complexes even by applying up-to-date physico-chemical methods.

Currently, we are cooperating with the Centre for Conservation of Wild Animals of the Republic of Kalmykia. Our colleagues from Yakutsk University, who study the horns of reindeer, have shown interest in our studies. We propose joint study of the composition of the bioactive substances of horns.



Prof. Romanov with a group of students from Kalmykia State University researching the horns of saigas and sheep. Pphoto by A. Lushchekina

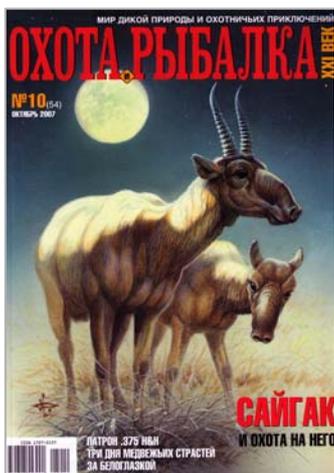
Propaganda for saiga hunting in 59,000 copies*

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The cover of the magazine "Hunting and fishing: 21st century" (No 10 October 2007) depicted an excellent picture of a saiga antelope. However, is the popularization of this endangered species something we should be glad about? This magazine, one of the most widely circulated and popular Russian magazines about hunting, published a long article by Sergei Losev about the saiga on five double pages with numerous high-quality photographs. The title speaks for itself: "Hunting the saiga" The title of the section is also expressive: "Trophies: a way to dreams." From the very first paragraph readers get a fantastic notion of the saiga. They learn that "the saiga can be encountered from the south Danube states and the Carpathian mountains, the steppes lying along the Black Sea, the Caucasian mountains, the Caspian and Aral Sea to the Irtys and Ob' rivers (north of 55 degrees N)." (p. 116). It is likely that the author, Sergei Losev, without having any doubts, copied these lines (as well as further information about saiga biology) from an old encyclopedia. It is important to remember that a person not aware of this problem will have biased information about current numbers and distribution of the saiga.

*According to the Atlas of the Russian Press (<http://www.mediaatlas.ru/editions/?a=view&id=5802>), the circulation of "Ohota i Rybalka: XXI vek [The Hunting and Fishing: 21st Century] is 59.000 copies.



A few pages further the author indicates that “Gorbachev’s perestroika came, coupons for meat appeared and hungry people forgot their fear... these antelopes started to be exterminated in such numbers that the hungry Central Asian states seceding from the USSR will not be able to rehabilitate saiga and goitered gazelle numbers (p. 120)

How passage correlates in the minds of readers with the initial information about the immense range of the saiga (implicitly suggesting high numbers) remains unclear. However, it speaks (quite disrespectfully) only about “Central Asian” states, implying that in the remaining part of the range (including Russia) all is well...

This suggestion is supported by the following passage: “Today, up-to-date rifles with powerful optics allow sport hunters not to chase saiga herds. They can be hunted without chasing or approaching them...” It further specifies technical details and an unambiguous current opportunity for saiga hunts to be arranged.

The majority of the article is dedicated to saiga hunting. It describes various methods of hunting and, as cited above, “the current status” of the species. However, most of the article is the author’s recollection of participation in commercial shooting of this animal in the 1970s.

He honestly indicates times and places and tells us about combats with poaching in that time. However, this detailed methodical description of saiga hunting using vehicle headlights for shooting was published in 2007 for a wide readership 15 years since hunting regulations were adopted by the Russian Federation, prohibiting the use of vehicles for shooting animals. It is impossible to use these methods for legal hunting, leaving aside the long-term moratorium on saiga hunting. Therefore, what we actually have here is a poacher’s manual.

It is amazing that this discourse about saiga population declines is confined only to the hungry Central Asian people “who have lost fear”. It is enough to take a look at the figures on population dynamics (Kuznetsov, Lushchekina, 2002; Shaimukhanbetov, 2004) to see that there is no direct correlation between this decline and the period of Perestroika. A rapid decline in numbers had begun several years before Gorbachev’s Perestroika and it was at the beginning of this Perestroika that saiga numbers stabilized or even started to grow in some parts of the range. The current decline in the population began in the second half of the 1990s after short-term growth and cannot be correlated to the suggested cause. However, the author did not bother to inspect any figures and hardly tried to investigate this issue. As to the problem of horn smuggling, the author appears not to know of it at all.

The conclusion of the article is characteristic. It is quite optimistic and convinces the reader of the permissibility and lawfulness of saiga hunting: “Today, saiga hunting is carried out by permit and at strictly allocated times (autumn and early winter). Let’s hope that herds of millions of saigas will be again grazing in the vast lands of our former state (p. 121).” The last phrase sounds merely like a mockery, because S. Losev does not mean that sheep will be grazing and eventually drive out the saiga from the pastures. This, of course, does not improve our general impression of the article.

To do the author justice, it must be admitted that he is not a persistent poacher; a peculiar hunting ethic characterises him. In this article, he mentions that he is “an opponent of hunting Red Data Book animals and birds [Ed: Species listed as threatened and hence legally protected] (adding, however, regarding a specific case, that “a huge fine for hunting them hunt was beyond any of our means...”). In another article (in the Russian newspaper for hunters, 20th April 2005) he remembers a case that took place in “Central Asia”: “A starving herd of saigas came to the vicinity of the City of Alma-Ata and descended into a ravine. Half the city rushed to get the free meat with spades and axes. It was a group of local hunters who did not allow the mad crowd to approach the animals. Shooting with their rifles into the air they prevented the slaughter.” This example is cited as a confirmation of his thesis on “how dishonest it is to hunt animals which have become weaker for want of food.”

I believe that editors ideally must be responsible for the articles which they publish. In this particular case, we have before us an article containing a number of completely false claims and important omissions, which in general creates a false idea of the subject and provokes the reader to violate the law. All the responsibility for this rests with on the anonymous editorial board. It is anonymous because nowhere (!) in the magazine are there any persons mentioned or the address of the editorial board indicated. These were discovered after much browsing of the internet**. Nor is there any information on the registration of this magazine.

Why is Losev’s article so important? Why is it important what magazines for hunters write about the saiga? The reason is simple - the audience for this magazine is dozens of times as large as that of any environmental publication, as it includes the most economically and politically active part of the population (it is no secret that hunting is the favorite “sport” of probably every more or less important bureaucrat and businessman). It is in this stratum of society that the decisions related to management, including those concerning the saiga, are taken. This absurd article in a glossy magazine with a large circulation may have the most disastrous consequences, particularly if it is not one article in isolation.

** The address of the editorial board of “Ohoia i Rybalka: XXI vek” is the following: 123995 Russia, Moscow, street 1905, house 7, tel.: +7 (495) 250-72-72 (suppl. 4160, 4161), e-mail: rog@mk.ru.

Project round-up

First round of Saiga Conservation Alliance small grants awarded

With the support of the Wildlife Conservation Network, the Saiga Conservation Alliance has initiated a small grants competition. The first round was held in September 2007, and four projects were chosen for support by the Steering Committee. The scheme is aimed at encouraging conservation initiatives by any group or individual that will make a real difference to saigas, and will contribute to the Convention on Migratory Species' Medium Term work programme. One strength of the programme is its accessible application procedure, with short proposals which can be submitted in either Russian or English, meaning it is open to groups who would not normally be able to apply for an international grant. The grants were of up to \$1500 in value.



The successful projects are:

- ✓ Khlodnev, A.V. Construction of an ecological trail in the "Stepnoi" nature reserve. Russia.
- ✓ Vashetko, E.V. Creation of an electronic library on the saiga. Uzbekistan
- ✓ Obgenova, O.B. To produce educational materials for younger schoolchildren, "On the track of the baby saiga"
- ✓ Esenamanov, R. Assessment of the distribution, sex-age structure and limiting factors for the Betpak-dala population of saigas in the winter period. Kazakhstan

A number of very strong proposals were submitted, from 6 countries, and four runners-up have been identified who will be supported if funds can be raised. The Steering Committee of the SCA is very keen to make this competition an annual event, if funding allows. *E.J. Milner-Gulland. For more information see www.saiga-conservation.com.*

Review of recent saiga publications

A book of collected works "The problem of conservation of biodiversity in North-Western Caspian Region: the Proceedings of the Scientific-Practical Conference, 20-21 October 2006, Elista, 266 pp, has been published, which includes the following papers on saigas and related issues:

Arylov Yu.N., Voznesenskaya V.V., Lushchekina A.A., Medjidov R.A., Milner-Gulland E.J., Ubushaev B.S., Arylova N.Yu. Study and conservation of the saiga in the north-west pre-Caspian region, p.33.

Arylova N.Yu., Lushchekina A.A., Voznesenskaya V.V. Monitoring of reproductive status of saiga females in the north-west pre-Caspian region, p. 54.

Kokshunova L.E. The behaviour of the European saiga (*Saiga tatarica* L.) during the pre-oestrus and oestrus periods. p. 59.

Kokshunova L.E., Bukreeva O.M. On the question of embryonic fecundity in the European saiga (*Saiga tatarica* L.). P. 67.

Romanov O.E. An alternative to saiga horns as a way of rescuing the saiga population. p. 74.

Kugulgitov, S.V., Kaminov, Yu.B., Medjidov, R.A. On the status of strictly protected natural territories in the Republic of Kalmykia. p. 111.

Staroverkina N.N. Prerequisites and prospects of the development of tourism in the Republic of Kalmykia. p. 278

Proceedings of the conference can be ordered from Yu.N. Arylov at kalmsaiga@elista.ru.

Bekenov A.B., Grachev Yu.A. Monitoring studies of the Betpakdala saiga population in Kazakhstan. Relevant problems of ecology and nature use in Kazakhstan and adjoining states. Pavlodar, 2007. p. 276-278.

Research was carried out in 2003-2006 within a Darwin Initiative project (see SN #1). The Betpakdala saiga population was found to be concentrated in the western part of its range and very sparse in the eastern part. The area of the range has reduced through the loss of peripheral areas. The numbers have increased from 6,900 in 2004 to 14,200 in 2006. The structure of this population is gradually reviving. The protection of animals has improved, but poaching still continues. *Contact: Amankul Bekenov, terio@nursat.kz*

The SCA is monitoring progress of the MOU on Saiga

Report on progress towards the CMS MOU in the period July-December 2007.

Compiled by E.J. Milner-Gulland from reports submitted by SN Editors, project leaders and Range State governments.

Summary: There have been some steps forward for saiga conservation in this reporting period. Many of the projects reported upon in the previous period are still ongoing, and a number of initiatives are under discussion or are planned for 2008. Highlights of this reporting period are:

International:

- The first meeting of the Saiga Conservation Alliance's Steering Committee in September in Uzbekistan, including representatives from all the range states except China.
- The confirmation of the SCA as a Wildlife Conservation Network Partner at the WCN Expo in October in the USA.

National:

- The gazetting in February of a new Protected Area (Irgiz-Turgaiskiy State Nature Reserve) in the range of the Betpak-dala population, Kazakhstan.
- The holding of a round table of all key saiga stakeholders in Uzbekistan in November, committing all to key actions supporting the MTWP in 2008.
- A cultural exchange between Kalmykia and the UK in June, followed by a public awareness campaign.
- The presentation of recommendations for improvements to saiga aerial survey techniques to the Committee on Forestry and Game Animals, Kazakhstan, in October.
- The beginning of a substantial new project in Mongolia, from September, funded by the MAVA foundation.

In China, lack of funding support has hampered saiga conservation efforts. We have no information about activities being carried out in Turkmenistan in this reporting period.

For several of the action points in the MTWP, little discernable action has taken place in this reporting period; this is of concern, particularly for those measures which were listed as A1 (urgent and high priority). Priority A1 activities that show no concrete progress since the coming into force of the MOU are:

Action 1.1. Russia signing the MOU.

Action 3.1. Compliance with CITES recommendations by Russia and Kazakhstan, and lifting of the moratorium on exports.

Action 10.1. An action plan for saiga conservation in the pre-Caspian region, including securing long-term funding.

Action 10.2. Regular population counts in the pre-Caspian region using appropriate methods.

Action 10.3. Financial security for saiga conservation institutions in the pre-Caspian region.

Action 11.2. Public awareness and engagement in the Ural population.

Action 11.3. Conservation planning for the Ural population.

The other A1 actions in the MTWP have seen some progress in some range states. Further major steps need to be taken by all stakeholders if substantial progress is to be made towards fulfilling the MTWP before the next meeting of the signatories to the MOU.

The full report is available on the MOU page of the SCA's website, www.saiga-conservation.com, together with report forms, the MTWP and other relevant documents and links.

Please contribute all information on progress in implementing the MTWP of the MOU to the Saiga Conservation Alliance, saigaconservationalliance@yahoo.co.uk, who are contracted by the Convention on Migratory Species to monitor progress towards the next meeting of the Signatories to the MOU. You may submit information at any time, although in order to guarantee inclusion in the next round-up, reports need to be with us by the **end of May 2008.**

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